

MISCELLANEOUS.

THE ORIGINS OF CHRISTIANITY.

COMMENTS ON THE STORY "THE CROWN OF THORNS."

The Crown of Thorns is a story of the time of Christ. It is fiction of the character of legend, utilising materials preserved in both the canonical scriptures and the Apocryphal traditions, but giving preference to the former. The hopes and beliefs of the main personalities, however, can throughout be verified by documentary evidence. The religious *milieu* is strictly historical.

The names of the two thieves who were crucified with Christ, Zoathan and Kamma, are taken from a note in the *Codex Colbertinus*. They are also mentioned in the *Gesta Pilati*, where they are called Dysmas and Gestas.

There are several points which deserve special notice :

The age in which Christianity originated was a period of syncretism ; that is to say, various religious views were welded together, and produced by their fusion a number of creeds more or less superstitious, more or less purified. Religious congregations were founded, such as the disciples, the baptisers or Sabians, the Ebionites, that is, "the poor," the Nazarenes (also called Nazarites), the Essenes, all of which existed in Palestine at and before the time of Christ. It is difficult to determine how far these sects were different names for the same thing, and how far they were parallel formations. Perhaps they were no more different than are Christian science and faith cure to-day ; or Theosophy and Spiritualism. May be they were absolutely the same thing called by different names as are "The Quakers" and "The Friends." This much is sure, they were similar and must be regarded as characteristic symptoms of the age. Analogous sects, like the Setites, or Sethites, the Therapeutæ, and other Gnostic congregations, further the Mithraists, the believers in Hermes Trismegistos, and their ilk, existed outside of Palestine, in Syria, Babylonia, and Egypt. The Mandæans, a Sabian sect, strongly influenced by Persian ideas, exist to-day in southern Babylonia, preserving to a great extent their Gnostic belief and traditions.¹

That Jesus was a Nazarene (or, as the Hebrew term is, *Nazir*), we have canonical testimony. The Nazarenes, called in Greek *Ναζαρηνοί* or *Ναζωραίοι*, are known through a statement in the Acts to have been a communistic sect, for they held all things in common. They continued to exist in the Christian era as a society of little significance in Cœle-Syria, whither they had fled from Jerusalem (according to Epiphanius, Pan. xxix. 7) shortly before the Romans began the siege in 70 A. D. They kept the Mosaic law and believed in Jesus as the messiah, using an Aramaic

¹The name is derived from the word *manda*, knowledge, an equivalent of the term *gnosis*.

version of the Gospel according to Matthew, which was called the Gospel of the Hebrews.¹

The similarity in sound between Nazir or Nazarene, and Nazareth (also called Nazara)² has been the source of much confusion, even among the early Christians. Nazareth must have been a very unimportant place, for it is not mentioned at all in Hebrew literature; and we do not even know the Hebrew spelling of the word. This has given rise to the idea entertained by some hypercritical minds that a village of that name did not yet exist in Christ's time. In all probability, it is the place now called en-Nâsira, a little village in Galilee. If the word en-Nâsira means "a place of watch," which seems probable, the exact Hebrew would be Netsereth (from נָצַר "to guard"), which comes very near the Hellenised form Nazareth preserved in the Greek gospels. The change of the *e* to the *a* indicates Phœnician influence, and the exact Phœnician form would be "Natsareth." The Phœnician character of the name seems to indicate that the population (as is frequently the case in Galilee) must have been of a mixed character, if not predominantly Phœnician.

The name Nazir (i. e., Nazarene, in Hebrew נָזִיר) has nothing to do with the village of Nazareth. Etymologically the word means a devotee, or a person who has made a vow; at least, this is the traditional explanation of the word which is derived from the root נָזַר, which in its Niphel and Hiphel forms means "to keep aloof from," or "to consecrate oneself."

The Hebrew pronunciation of Nazir and Nazareth must have been quite different. The *z* in Nazir is soft like the English *z*, the *z* in Nazareth is sharp, being *ts*, like the German *z*.

The old Nazirim, such as Samuel and Samson, did not allow a razor to touch their heads; they did not drink strong drinks; they lived in tents, not in houses, and preserved as much as possible the customs of the old desert life. Their abstinence from wine was not so much an act of temperance as an abstaining from all things made by human hands; for by avoiding civilised ways of living and clinging to nature they imagined they were nearer to God.

Like customs are ascribed by Diodorus to the Nabatæans; and the Rechabites are mentioned in Isaiah, chapter xxxv., as adhering to similar practices, which we have every reason to believe were the original institutions of the nomadic Jews before they settled in Judæa and adopted the Canaanite civilisation and city life.

The original Nazirim of the time of the Judges died out with the progress of civilisation, but a recollection of them was preserved in the traditions of the people, and so it happened that when in the times of the Babylonian exile the religious zeal of the Jews was reawakened, the Nazir institution was introduced as a regular part of the religious faith of the people, for which definite prescripts were made. It appears that men of this type, who aspired to be devotees of God, were later organised into congregations, and that they were especially zealous about the coming of the kingdom of heaven. Christ arose from their midst. He seems to have shared to some extent, though in a somewhat modified form, their views of the blissfulness of poverty and believed that for the sake of perfection the rich should surrender their wealth and "give it to the poor," which probably means "the Ebionites," i. e., the sect called "the Poor." In other words, on joining the congregation of "the Poor," a novice gave up all his property to the authorised officers of the sect.

The probability is that Jesus actually surrendered his property on entering the

¹ See *Encyclopædia Britannica*, Vol. XVII., p. 302, s. v., "Nazarenes."

² The Greek forms are Ναζαρέν, Ναζαρέτ, and Ναζαρά.

Nazarene congregation. St. Paul says in 2 Cor. viii. 9 that "Jesus Christ though he was rich, yet for our sake became poor," and the context involves the inference that Jesus surrendered a goodly store of worldly possessions, and not merely spiritual gifts; and we may assume that St. Paul still knew some Nazarene contemporaries of Jesus who remembered the day when their martyred master joined the congregation of the Poor, and became poor for the sake of becoming a preacher of the kingdom of heaven.

While the tradition according to which Jesus was a Nazarene is unequivocal and canonical, we know for certain that he was not a slavish observer of the Nazarene ordinances, nor did he limit his field of activity to the narrow circle of their congregations. He ate and drank with sinners (which may simply mean the unconverted multitudes who had not joined the sectarian community) and was not afraid to have intercourse even with the much-hated publicans; Jesus was not a total abstainer from intoxicating drinks, which caused his enemies to call him "a glutton and wine bibber"; and he gave such offence to the Sabians that John the Baptist, who had recognised his leadership, began to lose faith in his messianic mission. Thus we are justified in saying that though Jesus belonged to the Nazarene sect he was not a narrow sectarian and cannot be regarded as having committed himself to their peculiar sectarian doctrines.

The early Greek Christians, not being familiar with the details of Jewish customs, were unable to distinguish between Nazarethan and Nazarene, and thus it is possible that Christ is sometimes called Nazarene where the original meaning might have been "the man of Nazareth." This is especially the case of the title which was attached by Pilate to the cross of Christ, where he is called according to one version simply "Jesus, King of the Jews," and according to another, "Jesus, the Nazarene, King of the Jews." The probability is that the traditional form Nazarene, that is "the Nazir," is correct; for Jesus was crucified on account of being regarded, not by all the Jews, certainly not by the priests and Pharisees, but only by the Nazirim, as the messiah, the Anointed One, i. e., the King, and therefore Pilate would have been apt to characterise him as a Nazir, while he would not have called special attention to the fact that Jesus, according to his birth-place, did not belong to the province of his jurisdiction.

The conception of a saviour was by no means an exclusively Jewish idea. It is a religious notion which prevailed at the time of Christ among all the nations of the Roman empire. The Greeks worshipped Apollo, Hermes, Orpheus, Heracles, Æsculapius, etc., the Persians Mithras, the Egyptians Anubis, Osiris, Harpocrates, T'oth, as saviours from death and perdition; and Apollonius of Tyana, a historical personality of the first century of the Christian era, became the centre of a group of miracle tales which, in spite of the coarseness of his historians, are similar to the gospel story of Jesus of Nazareth.

The term "Saviour" (Greek σωτήρ) is a Gentile expression and has no true equivalent in Hebrew. The words *goel* (גֹּאֵל) and *messiah* (מָשִׁיחַ) come nearest to it; but the former means "avenger" and the latter "the anointed one," which signifies a king that has become sacrosanct. In later times, after the Babylonian exile, the latter expression acquired the peculiar sense in which the word messiah is still understood. But in the time of Christ the notion of a messiah had by no means a definite connotation. Enoch conceives the messiah as having existed before the sun and the stars were created (chapters 48 and 62); Ezra speaks of him as a man coming out of the midst of the sea¹ (like Oannes of the Babylonians, the

¹ 2 Ezra xiii. 5, 25, 51.

divine mediator between god Ea and mankind); and the Revelation of St. John (chapter xii.) represents him as a mythological hero who is born in heaven of a woman persecuted by a dragon, but rescued from the fury of the monster, and who on coming of age will appear on a white horse and rule the world with an iron rod.¹

Whenever a people is downtrodden, they begin to hope for a saviour. We have instances of this fact in the United States among the Indian tribes; and the same is true of many nations who were subjected by the Romans to the sway of their empire. Though the idea of a messiah was by no means definite and uniform among the Jews, he was, as a rule, regarded by the common people as a political liberator from the yoke of the Gentiles. Nor was it absolutely necessary that there should be only one messiah; every one who would rescue the nation from shame and perdition might receive this honorable name. For instance, Cyrus, the king of the Persians, is positively called the Messiah, "the Anointed One of the Lord," in canonical literature (viz., in Isaiah, chapter xlv. 1). That the messiah might be of a spiritual character, a saviour from sin and moral evil, was not foreign to the more refined thinkers of the age of Jesus and this view was finally accepted by the rabbis. In the Zend-Avesta the saviour, the Soshuant, is regarded as "righteousness incarnate," as "the son of a virgin," and the judge of mankind on the day of resurrection; and these views may have been common in Judæa among the sectarians, for we know that at least the Essenes entertained many Persian ideas.

The most successful military messiah who rose in the Christian era among the Jews was Simeon Bar-Cochba,² who maintained himself for some time against Hadrian in the years 131-135 A. D., and instituted a government, coins of which are still extant. Bar-Cochba represents the messiah conception which in our story is characterised in Zoathan.

The method of the Roman authorities in dealing with messiahs was very simple indeed, for as a rule the mere assumption of the title was sufficient to condemn a man to crucifixion, which was the usual Roman style of execution.

Jesus was executed by the Romans, not by the Jews. The Jews had no jurisdiction in questions of life and death; and, if he had been executed according to Jewish law, he would have been stoned, not crucified.

Among the religious practices which still prevailed among many races at this period, there is one which reminds us of prehistoric religious cannibalism: it was the drinking of blood for the purpose of partaking of the qualities of the animal or person that was sacrificed. This religious ceremony being very ancient, can be traced among the nations of all continents,—in the interior of Africa, as well as in Asia and America. The communion cup, which contained the blood of a number of persons and was drunk in common by all of them, served as a symbol of the most consecrated ties of brotherhood, constituting, as it was believed, actual consanguinity.³

Further, there existed the peculiar rite of a communion repast which was practised by the worshippers of Mithras. We are told by Justin Martyr, that this Persian sacrament was the same ceremony as the Lord's Supper of the Christians,—a

¹ The significance of the Christ conception of this interesting chapter, which knows nothing of Jesus, nothing of his birth at Bethlehem, nothing of his life nor of his death on the cross, and conceives him as a superhuman personality of carnage, indicating the prevalence of pagan and specifically Babylonian traditions among the Jews, was recognised for the first time by Professor H. Gunkel in his interesting book *Schöpfung und Chaos*.

² A native of Coziba, hence his name Bar-Coziba, which he changed with an allusion to Num. xiv. 17 to Bar-Cochba, i. e., son of a star.

³ See *The Blood Covenant*, by H. Clay Trumbull, D. D. London, G. Redway, 1887.

fact which the pious church father attributes to the machinations of evil spirits, instituted for the purpose of confounding the faithful. And Tertullian, referring to the same fact, ascribes it to Satan, saying that it is the policy of Satan to imitate the sacraments of God.

Eucharists or love-feasts, though different from communion feasts, served a similar purpose. They were celebrated among the Greeks, the old Romans, and the Jews; but the sectarians, especially the Nazarenes and the so-called disciples, seem to have had a peculiar way of breaking bread and of giving thanks.¹

Paul, no doubt, was familiar with both the Jewish and Gentile practices, and he regulated the communion in the Gentile church, giving it his own peculiar interpretation. Being born in the diaspora, he was imbued with the spirit of Gentile civilisation, and it was natural that he should have transformed the idea of a messiah and made it acceptable to the Gentiles. He dropped the properly Nazir features of the Christian congregations, and it was he who translated the word *messiah* by *Christos*.²

All these historical conditions are woven into the story *The Crown of Thorns*, and indicate the way in which Christianity developed from Judaism through the messianic hopes of the Nazarenes as interpreted by the Apostle Paul of Tarsus. How different the Christianity of Paul was from the Christianity of St. Peter, the personal disciple of Jesus, is obvious in the canonical documents of the New Testament and is sufficiently known.

Paul, in the story, being a Gentile to the Gentiles and a Jew to the Jews, is careful not to give offence to the Jews; and thus his way of celebrating the Lord's Supper is not carried so far as to interpret the wine as the blood of Jesus and the bread as his body,—a self-restraint quite in keeping with the character of the apostle; but otherwise he propounds to his host without reserve his interpretation of the new faith.

St. Paul's view that the coming of the Lord was near at hand was a common notion in his day, and was entertained even by Jesus who in his eschatological prophecies solemnly declared :

"Verily I say unto you that this generation shall not pass till all these things be done."—Mark xiii. 30; Matth. xxv. 34, and Luke xxii. 32.

And again :

"For the Son of man shall come in the glory of his Father with his angels; and then he shall reward every man according to his works.

"Verily I say unto you, There be some standing here, which shall not taste of death, till they see the Son of man coming in his kingdom."—Matth. 27-28.

This idea formed one of the main doctrines of the early Church and was for a long time inculcated with great seriousness.

Longinus is, according to an old tradition, the name of the centurion under the cross, and it is said that he as well as the Roman troops to which he belonged, who were garrisoned in Palestine at the time of Christ, were natives of Germany.

That Salome, the wife of Zebedee, was visiting in Jerusalem at the time of the Crucifixion is based upon canonical evidence, for the fact is mentioned in the New Testament.

¹ Articles on the origin of Christianity, giving further details of the historical origin of the Lord's Supper and of other institutions of the Christian religion, have appeared periodically in *The Open Court* and *The Monist*.

² The word *χριστός* is by no means a proper translation of "Messiah." It does not mean "the Anointed One," but "he who should be and is about to be anointed."

Ben-Midrash, the main character of the story, represents the educated Jew of the time of Christ, who, in spite of his objections to the Nazir sectarianism, is represented as being in sympathy with the new doctrines,—an assumption which is not improbable, for we know from the Talmud that there were orthodox Jews who were by no means hostile to members of the Nazir congregation.¹

While Ben-Midrash, by reason of his personal relations with Zebedee, Jesus, and Paul, acquired a comprehension of the significance of the new religion the germs of which were developed in his country and partly in his immediate surroundings, we cannot wonder that the large mass of the Jews held aloof. Paul's Christianity made too many concessions to Gentile modes of thoughts and it left their dearest hopes, viz., of a restitution of their national independence, unfulfilled.

While primitive Christianity contained ideas which had to be abandoned by the Church, we cannot be blind to the fact that from the beginning there was in it a moral earnestness, a longing for purity of heart, a love of righteousness and the



EDUARD BIEDERMANN, THE ARTIST.

spirit of charity and good-will, which overshadowed all other doctrines and institutions so as to be the keynote of the whole movement. These features of the new faith, together with its firm conviction of the doctrine of Christ's resurrection² and the belief in immortality, constituted then and at all times, as they do still, the backbone of Christianity.

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The illustrations of our story were made by Eduard Biedermann. Mr. Biedermann was born in Gotha, Germany, and educated in Munich and Weimar. He has travelled extensively on the Continent and in Northern Africa. Engaged in artistic work for some time in Freiburg, Germany, and in Louisville, Ky., he has lately established himself in Chicago. There is no need of praising his talents, for

¹ See Dr. Hirsch Grätz, *Gnosticismus und Judenthum*, p. 24.

² As to Christ's resurrection and the present conception of it in Christian theology see the article of the Rev. Wm. Weber in the current number of *The Monist*, Vol. XI., No. 3, pp. 361-404.

the pictures speak for themselves. The composition as well as the technique reach a height which shows an unusual degree of artistic mastership.

The portrait of St. Paul, the Apostle, is drawn with a leaning toward the traditional view, but also with regard to the description of his personality preserved in the Acts of Thekla, according to which Paul had lively dark eyes, and was at times so enthusiastic that he seemed like an angel. His nose was long and somewhat bent; his eyebrows met, and the hair on the top of his head was scanty. That this document, leaving out the accretions of later ages, is genuine and must be assumed to contain first-hand information, has on the strength of incidental data been proved by F. C. Conybeare of Oxford in the preface to his *Monuments of Early Christianity*.¹

In our frontispiece, Mr. Biedermann represents Christ not altogether as a passive sufferer, as a lamb that suffers itself to be slaughtered in dumb submission to fate. While following the traditional artistic conception of Christ and utilising especially the picture of Sodoma at Sienna, our artist has succeeded in showing the thorn-crowned man of sorrow not in a collapse of physical and mental agony, but as a man who in his sufferings exhibits both strength and depth of comprehension.

P. C.

BUDDHA RELICS.²

Important archæological discoveries in regard to the birthplace of Buddha, have been made by Mr. William Clanton Peppe, Birdpore estate, Gorakhur, N. W. P., India, and it will be of interest to give some account of the work he has achieved. The story of the birth of Buddha is, of course, well known, and it will be sufficient here to recall the main facts. Buddha was born in the fifth century B. C., and was the son of Mahamaya, a daughter of the Raja of Koli, and one of the principal wives of Suddhodana, who, in the words of one authority, "ruled over a tribe who were called the Sakyas, and who, from their well-watered rice fields, could see the giant Himalayas looming up against the clear blue of the Indian sky." Suddhodana's capital was Kapilavastu, a few days' journey north of Benares, and the Raja had as wives two of the daughters of Koli, of whom Mahayama was the elder. Both were childless, and there was great rejoicing when, in about the forty-fifth year of her age, Mahamaya promised her husband a son. In due time she started with the intention of being confined at her parents' home, but the party halting on the way under the shade of some lofty satin trees, in a pleasant garden called Lumbini, on the banks of the river Rohini, the modern Kohana, her son, the future Buddha, was unexpectedly born. The Birdpore estate is situated in the Buddha country, and it was on a "stupa" on his estate that Mr. Peppe made an important discovery of Buddha relics, the stupa being situated at P'iprahwa, close to the frontier, and about eleven miles nearly due south of the eastern end of the ancient city of Kapilavastu, the position of which has now been fixed with certainty, as well as that of the Lumbini garden, which is marked by a pillar erected by the Emperor Aoska in the third century B. C. to commemorate his visit to the holy spot in the third year of his reign.

"Since the discovery of the pillar at the Lumbini Garden commemorating

¹The passage is quoted in the article "The Cross of Golgotha" in *The Open Court*, 1899, Vol. XIII., No. 8, p. 476.

²Communicated by John Sandison. From the *Aberdeen Gazette*.